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If You're Wrong, Admit It

WITHIN A MINUTE'S WALK OF MY HOUSE THERE WAS A WILD STRETCH of virgin timber, where the blackberry thickets foamed white in the springtime, where the squirrels nested and reared their young, and the horseweeds grew as tall as a horse's head. This unspoiled woodland was called Forest Park—and it was a forest, probably not much different in appearance from what it was when Columbus discovered America. I frequently walked in this park with Rex, my little Boston bulldog. He was a friendly, harmless little hound; and since we rarely met anyone in the park, I took Rex along without a leash or a muzzle.

One day we encountered a mounted policeman in the park, a policeman itching to show his authority.

"What do you mean by letting that dog run loose in the park without a muzzle and leash?" he reprimanded me. "Don't you know it's against the law?"

"Yes, I know it is," I replied softly, "but I didn't think he would do any harm out here."

"You didn't think! You didn't think! The law doesn't give a tinker's damn about what you think. That dog might kill a squirrel

or bite a child. Now, I'm going to let you off this time, but if I catch this dog out here again without a muzzle and a leash, you'll have to tell it to the judge."

I meekly promised to obey.

And I did obey—for a few times. But Rex didn't like the muzzle, and neither did I; so we decided to take a chance. Everything was lovely for a while, and then we struck a snag. Rex and I raced over the brow of a hill one afternoon and there, suddenly—to my dismay—I saw the majesty of the law, astride a bay horse. Rex was out in front, heading straight for the officer.

I was in for it. I knew it. So I didn't wait until the policeman started talking. I beat him to it. I said: "Officer, you've caught me red-handed. I'm guilty. I have no alibis, no excuses. You warned me last week that if I brought the dog out here again without a muzzle you would fine me."

"Well, now," the policeman responded in a soft tone. "I know it's a temptation to let a little dog like that have a run out here when nobody is around."

"Sure it's a temptation," I replied, "but it is against the law."

"Well, a little dog like that isn't going to harm anybody," the policeman remonstrated.

"No, but he may kill squirrels," I said.

"Well now, I think you are taking this a bit too seriously," he told me. "I'll tell you what you do. You just let him run over the hill there where I can't see him—and we'll forget all about it."

That policeman, being human, wanted a feeling of importance; so when I began to condemn myself, the only way he could nourish his self-esteem was to take the magnanimous attitude of showing mercy.

But suppose I had tried to defend myself—well, did you ever argue with a policeman?

But instead of breaking lances with him, I admitted that he was absolutely right and I was absolutely wrong; I admitted it quickly, openly, and with enthusiasm. The affair terminated graciously in my taking his side and his taking my side. Lord Chesterfield himself could hardly have been more gracious than this

mounted policeman, who, only a week previously, had threatened to have the law on me.

If we know we are going to be rebuked anyhow, isn't it far better to beat the other person to it and do it ourselves? Isn't it much easier to listen to self-criticism than to bear condemnation from alien lips?

Say about yourself all the derogatory things you know the other person is thinking or wants to say or intends to say—and say them before that person has a chance to say them. The chances are a hundred to one that a generous, forgiving attitude will be taken and your mistakes will be minimized just as the mounted policeman did with me and Rex.

Ferdinand E. Warren, a commercial artist, used this technique to win the good will of a petulant, scolding buyer of art.

"It is important, in making drawings for advertising and publishing purposes, to be precise and very exact," Mr. Warren said as he told the story.

"Some art editors demand that their commissions be executed immediately; and in these cases, some slight error is liable to occur. I knew one art director in particular who was always delighted to find fault with some little thing. I have often left his office in disgust, not because of the criticism, but because of his method of attack. Recently I delivered a rush job to this editor, and he phoned me to call at his office immediately. He said something was wrong. When I arrived, I found just what I had anticipated—and dreaded. He was hostile, gloating over his chance to criticize. He demanded with heat why I had done so and so. My opportunity had come to apply the self-criticism I had been studying about. So I said: 'Mr. So-and-so, if what you say is true, I am at fault and there is absolutely no excuse for my blunder. I have been doing drawings for you long enough to know better. I'm ashamed of myself.'

"Immediately he started to defend me. 'Yes, you're right, but after all, this isn't a serious mistake. It is only—'

"I interrupted him. 'Any mistake,' I said, 'may be costly and they are all irritating.'

"He started to break in, but I wouldn't let him. I was having a grand time. For the first time in my life, I was criticizing myself—and I loved it.

" 'I should have been more careful,' I continued. 'You give me a lot of work, and you deserve the best; so I'm going to do this drawing all over.'

" 'No! No!' he protested. 'I wouldn't think of putting you to all that trouble.' He praised my work, assured me that he wanted only a minor change and that my slight error hadn't cost his firm any money; and, after all, it was a mere detail—not worth worrying about.

"My eagerness to criticize myself took all the fight out of him. He ended up by taking me to lunch; and before we parted, he gave me a check and another commission."

There is a certain degree of satisfaction in having the courage to admit one's errors. It not only clears the air of guilt and defensiveness, but often helps solve the problem created by the error.

Bruce Harvey of Albuquerque, New Mexico, had incorrectly authorized payment of full wages to an employee on sick leave. When he discovered his error, he brought it to the attention of the employee and explained that to correct the mistake he would have to reduce his next paycheck by the entire amount of the overpayment. The employee pleaded that as that would cause him a serious financial problem, could the money be repaid over a period of time? In order to do this, Harvey explained, he would have to obtain his supervisor's approval. "And this I knew," reported Harvey, "would result in a boss-type explosion. While trying to decide how to handle this situation better, I realized that the whole mess was my fault and I would have to admit it to my boss.

"I walked into his office, told him that I had made a mistake and then informed him of the complete facts. He replied in an explosive manner that it was the fault of the personnel department. I repeated that it was my fault. He exploded again about carelessness in the accounting department. Again I explained it was my fault. He blamed two other people in the office. But each

time I reiterated it was my fault. Finally, he looked at me and said, 'Okay, it was your fault. Now straighten it out.' The error was corrected and nobody got into trouble. I felt great because I was able to handle a tense situation and had the courage not to seek alibis. My boss has had more respect for me ever since."

Any fool can try to defend his or her mistakes—and most fools do—but it raises one above the herd and gives one a feeling of nobility and exultation to admit one's mistakes. For example, one of the most beautiful things that history records about Robert E. Lee is the way he blamed himself and only himself for the failure of Pickett's charge at Gettysburg.

Pickett's charge was undoubtedly the most brilliant and picturesque attack that ever occurred in the Western world. General George E. Pickett himself was picturesque. He wore his hair so long that his auburn locks almost touched his shoulders; and, like Napoleon in his Italian campaigns, he wrote ardent love-letters almost daily while in the battlefield. His devoted troops cheered him that tragic July afternoon as he rode off jauntily toward the Union lines, his cap set at a rakish angle over his right ear. They cheered and they followed him, man touching man, rank pressing rank, with banners flying and bayonets gleaming in the sun. It was a gallant sight. Daring. Magnificent. A murmur of admiration ran through the Union lines as they beheld it.

Pickett's troops swept forward at any easy trot, through orchard and cornfield, across a meadow and over a ravine. All the time, the enemy's cannon was tearing ghastly holes in their ranks. But on they pressed, grim, irresistible.

Suddenly the Union infantry rose from behind the stone wall on Cemetery Ridge where they had been hiding and fired volley after volley into Pickett's onrushing troops. The crest of the hill was a sheet of flame, a slaughterhouse, a blazing volcano. In a few minutes, all of Pickett's brigade commanders except one were down, and four-fifths of his five thousand men had fallen.

General Lewis A. Armistead, leading the troops in the final plunge, ran forward, vaulted over the stone wall, and, waving his cap on the top of his sword, shouted:

"Give 'em the steel, boys!"

They did. They leaped over the wall, bayoneted their enemies, smashed skulls with clubbed muskets, and planted the battleflags of the South on Cemetery Ridge.

The banners waved there only for a moment. But that moment, brief as it was, recorded the high-water mark of the Confederacy.

Pickett's charge—brilliant, heroic—was nevertheless the beginning of the end. Lee had failed. He could not penetrate the North. And he knew it.

The South was doomed.

Lee was so saddened, so shocked, that he sent in his resignation and asked Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy, to appoint "a younger and abler man." If Lee had wanted to blame the disastrous failure of Pickett's charge on someone else, he could have found a score of alibis. Some of his division commanders had failed him. The cavalry hadn't arrived in time to support the infantry attack. This had gone wrong and that had gone awry.

But Lee was far too noble to blame others. As Pickett's beaten and bloody troops struggled back to the Confederate lines, Robert E. Lee rode out to meet them all alone and greeted them with a self-condemnation that was little short of sublime. "All this has been my fault," he confessed. "I and I alone have lost this battle."

Few generals in all history have had the courage and character to admit that.

Michael Cheung, who teaches our course in Hong Kong, told of how the Chinese culture presents some special problems and how sometimes it is necessary to recognize that the benefit of applying a principle may be more advantageous than maintaining an old tradition. He had one middle-aged class member who had been estranged from his son for many years. The father had been an opium addict, but was now cured. In Chinese tradition an older person cannot take the first step. The father felt that it was up to his son to take the initiative toward a reconciliation. In an early session, he told the class about the grandchildren he had never seen and how much he desired to be reunited with his son. His classmates, all Chinese, understood his conflict between his

desire and long-established tradition. The father felt that young people should have respect for their elders and that he was right in not giving in to his desire, but to wait for his son to come to him.

Toward the end of the course the father again addressed his class. "I have pondered this problem," he said. "Dale Carnegie says, 'If you are wrong, admit it quickly and emphatically.' It is too late for me to admit it quickly, but I can admit it emphatically. I wronged my son. He was right in not wanting to see me and to expel me from his life. I may lose face by asking a younger person's forgiveness, but I was at fault and it is my responsibility to admit this." The class applauded and gave him their full support. At the next class he told how he went to his son's house, asked for and received forgiveness and was now embarked on a new relationship with his son, his daughter-in-law and the grandchildren he had at last met.

Elbert Hubbard was one of the most original authors who ever stirred up a nation, and his stinging sentences often aroused fierce resentment. But Hubbard, with his rare skill for handling people, frequently turned his enemies into friends.

For example, when some irritated reader wrote in to say that he didn't agree with such and such an article and ended by calling Hubbard this and that, Elbert Hubbard would answer like this:

> Come to think it over, I don't entirely agree with it myself. Not everything I wrote yesterday appeals to me today. I am glad to learn what you think on the subject. The next time you are in the neighborhood you must visit us and we'll get this subject threshed out for all time. So here is a handclasp over the miles, and I am,
>
> Yours sincerely,

What could you say to a man who treated you like that?

When we are right, let's try to win people gently and tactfully to our way of thinking, and when we are wrong—and that will be surprisingly often, if we are honest with ourselves—let's admit our

mistakes quickly and with enthusiasm. Not only will that technique produce astonishing results; but, believe it or not, it is a lot more fun, under the circumstances, than trying to defend oneself.

Remember the old proverb: "By fighting you never get enough, but by yielding you get more than you expected."

Principle 3

If you are wrong, admit it quickly and emphatically.
